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Haig Tells Of Theories On Erasure

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White House chief of staff

Alexander M. Haig Jr. said yesterday he and White House lawyers had discussed fears that "some sinister force" erased one of President Nixon's subpoenaed Watergate tapes.

Testifying in federal court here, Haig told of what he called the "devil theories" about the controversial 18 1/4-minute gap in the recording, which has yet to be explained.

Haig said the fears were aired at a White House meeting on the evening of Nov. 20, the day before the President's lawyers apprehensively reported the erasure to U.S. District Court Judge John J. Sirica.

At that point, Haig said, the lawyers were convinced that President Nixon's personal secretary, Rose Mary Woods, could not have caused the two-toned humming noise that obliterated the tape for an 18 1/4-minute interval.

Miss Woods has testified that she might have caused a five-minute gap in the recording, but, she insisted, no more than that.

The erasure obliterated a June 20, 1972, discussion of the Watergate scandal between the President and former White House chief of staff H. R. (Bob) Haldeman. The 18 1/4-minute segment was drowned out by a long

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Associated Press

White House aides Haig and Garment, left, leave court.

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humming noise that drops noticeably in volume after the five-minute mark.

Haig said this was "a source of great distress" to White House lawyers.

As a result, he said, they discussed the possibility that "perhaps there had been one tone applied by Miss Woods . . . and then perhaps some sinister force had come in and applied the other energy source and taken care of the information of that tape."

Judge Sirica broke in and asked Haig: "Has anyone ever suggested who that sinister force might be?"

Haig said, "No, your Honor." He said he told the lawyers that they should first find out who had been given access to the recording.

White House records indicate that only Miss Woods and presidential assistant Stephen Bull were given the tape—since it was subpoenaed last July. They got the recording last Sept. 29 after Mr. Nixon asked Miss Woods to summarize the highlights for him. Bull was told to help her.

Miss Woods said she might have caused a five-minute gap in the tape when she accidentally pushed the wrong button on a recording machine in her office Oct. 1 during the course of a short phone call.

Haig made clear to newsmen after yesterday's hearing that he now thinks Miss Woods was responsible for the entire erasure—despite her testimony that the phone call lasted only about 5 minutes. She said she noticed her mistake as soon as she hung up the phone.

"I've known women who think they've talked for five minutes and then have talked for an hour," Haig said.

Miss Woods began reviewing the recording on Sept. 29 at Camp David. At one point, she has said, Mr. Nixon came in for a few minutes and monitored a few excerpts, "pushing the buttons back and forth."

Haig was asked by report-

ers whether he had ever asked the President if he could have erased anything.

Haig, looking somewhat pained, shook his head negatively.

During his testimony, Mr. Nixon's chief of staff also admitted that White House officials hesitated to disclose the 18 1/4-minute erasure when it was first discovered, partly because of fears of how it would look to the American public.

Haig recalled that the White House had already suffered a black eye, unfairly from his point of view, as a result of its earlier report to Judge Sirica that two other subpoenaed Watergate tape recordings never existed.

"We had just had two non-recordings, which was fairly traumatic from our perspective," Haig testified, "and it was important we not have a repeat of that kind of thing, which led to perceptions by the American people which I don't think were justified by the facts."

As a result, Haig said, White House lawyers were anxious to come up with an explanation for the erasure before marching over to Sirica again. The attorneys, Haig said, were busy at the time working on a complete index of the subpoenaed recordings and related documents, and they wanted to find out if there were any "other discrepancies" that should be reported.

Mr. Nixon himself, Haig added, had other things to bother about besides Watergate.

White House lawyers say they first discovered the 18¼-minute erasure on the evening of Nov. 14. Haig has said he was told immediately and notified the President the next day. Sirica was not told until Nov. 21, after the President's attorneys had decided, for the moment at least, that there was "no innocent explanation" they could offer.

Haig said he discovered that a discussion of the Watergate scandal itself had been erased after obtaining notes that Haldeman had jotted down at the June 20, 1972, meeting. The notes were found in Haldeman's files at the Executive Office Building on the night of Nov. 15, Haig said, but only after a phone call to Haldeman who had the only combination to the safe in which they were kept.

Under questioning by Assistant Watergate Special Prosecutor Richard Benveniste, Haig insisted that Haldeman "does not influence what we do at the White House." Haig said he expressed "considerable chagrin" to former Haldeman aide Lawrence M. Higby "about not having the combination to that safe in the White House."

But Haig said he was unaware that Higby had been told by Haldeman not to give the notes to current White House officials without first summarizing them over the phone to Haldeman.

Haig also acknowledged that no attempt was made to search Haldeman's files until Nov. 15, although they contained subpoenaed documents that were then due to be delivered to Judge Sirica with the tapes on Nov. 20.

The hearings were recessed indefinitely at the conclusion of Haig's testimony while audio experts jointly selected by the White House and Watergate prosecutors continue testing the suspect June 20 recording.

Sirica said he expects a report from the experts "sometime next week."